# Beyond the Knapsack: Rethinking Whiteness, Privilege, and Class in Rural America

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Over the past two decades, the terms "white privilege" and "whiteness" has moved from the seminar room at the university to mainstream American culture. What began as the language of ethnic studies and sociological theory now surfaces in college orientations, TED Talks, HR workshops, and celebrity interviews. These terms are widely circulated, but their meaning is often contested and misunderstood. For some, they illuminate structural inequities. For others, they provoke confusion or resentment.

This essay does not deny the reality of racial hierarchy in American life. Instead, it argues that the discourse of "white privilege," as it is commonly deployed, often obscures class difference. Whiteness is not a monolith, nor is privilege evenly distributed. To speak meaningfully about privilege, we must attend to how race and class intersect—especially in the context of rural, working-class white communities in places such as Appalachia and the Ozarks.

James Baldwin observed that "being white means never having to think about it" (*The White Man's Guilt*). However, for poor rural whites, whiteness has always been a site of awareness and anxiety. They have always had to think about it. Epithets like "redneck," "white trash," and "hillbilly" remind these communities of their conditional belonging. The media and popular culture amplify these stereotypes: sitcom caricatures (like My Name Is Earl), exploitative reality television (Cops), and reductive portrayals in crime shows render the rural white underclass visible only as objects of ridicule. Kirby Moss discusses this paradox in his book, "The Color of Class" Poor Whites and The Paradox of Privilege." Rural whites are positioned as the cultural default in national mythology, yet stigmatized when they fail to embody bourgeois norms of education, speech, or political behavior.

Here Du Bois's concept of *double consciousness* resonates. Although developed to describe African American identity, the experience of seeing oneself through the eyes of a hostile culture is not unfamiliar to the rural white poor (Du Bois, 1903). bell hooks illustrates this in her book, *Where We Stand: Class Matters*, when she claims that the white underclass frequently functions as a foil through which more affluent whites define themselves as enlightened and cosmopolitan (hooks). Similarly, Tressie McMillan Cottom has argued that "whiteness is a resource. And like all resources, it is unevenly distributed" (Cottom, 2012).

The unevenness is evident when we return to Peggy McIntosh's seminal 1989 essay, "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack." Her list of privileges—seeing one's race represented in media, or moving through public space without suspicion—reflects a particular class position (McIntosh). A child raised in a double-wide in Shannon County, Missouri, does not see themselves reflected positively on television. Nor do they experience whiteness as an unmarked norm. Instead, their whiteness is coded through figures like "Cletus the Slack-Jawed Yokel" or the methamphetamine-addicted suspects of *Cops.* The "invisible knapsack" is not carried equally.

This cultural marginalization of poor rural whites is compounded by the structural neglect of rural America. For example, Iron County, Missouri, (where I grew up) and Ferguson, Missouri, had nearly identical median family incomes in the 2010s—approximately $38,000. National media attention focused on Ferguson, Missouri while Iron County, just 80 miles south, struggles with deindustrialization, waste dumping, and state dependency and no one notices. This selective focus reflects what Michael Zweig, in *The Working Class Majority,* refers to as the deliberate omission of class from American racial discourse (Zweig, 2000).

The point is not to deny that whiteness functions as a system of advantage. Instead, it is to insist on a more nuanced analysis: one that acknowledges class stratification within whiteness itself. Nancy Isenberg's *White Trash: The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America* makes this explicit: "We must stop assuming that every white person in America has always had access to the same systems of power. They have not. That is the dirty secret of whiteness: some whites have always been more white than others" (Isenberg, 2016).

Academics must stop reducing complex social identities to a single register. Privilege is not just racial or ethnic. It encompasses geographic, economic, and cultural aspects as well. Poor white communities are not exempt from systemic disadvantage simply because they are white. They occupy a fraught position: stigmatized for failing to embody the normative expectations of whiteness, while simultaneously excluded from discourses of racial oppression.

If conversations about whiteness are to be productive, they must integrate class. Otherwise, the language of privilege risks silencing precisely those voices that could complicate our understanding of race and inequality in America.

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